



Language, Politics and Education

“The ANC is committed to the development of indigenous languages. We call on our government to prepare for the introduction of the teaching of our indigenous languages by 2014.”

ANC January 8th Statement, 2013

South Africa has 11 official languages, and these 11 are not the only languages spoken, read and written, in our country.

The latest South African legislation having to do with languages is the [Use of Official Languages Act, 2012](#), gazetted on 1 October 2012.

South Africa has a [Pan South African Languages Board](#), and there is a separate institution known as [Kha Ri Gude Literacy Campaign](#), whose several objectives include the teaching of mother-tongue literacy, basic numeracy, and oral English to [“adults who missed out on their schooling”](#) .

What is the concern of the Communist University in relation to languages? What would be the matters to discuss, about languages, in Communist University study circles, political schools and e-mail forums?

These questions must remain open, but we can attempt some provisional answers.

Language in the Communist University

The Communist University has its own language policy. It is that participants may use any language of their choice. It is not the responsibility of the speaker or the writer to translate his or her output.

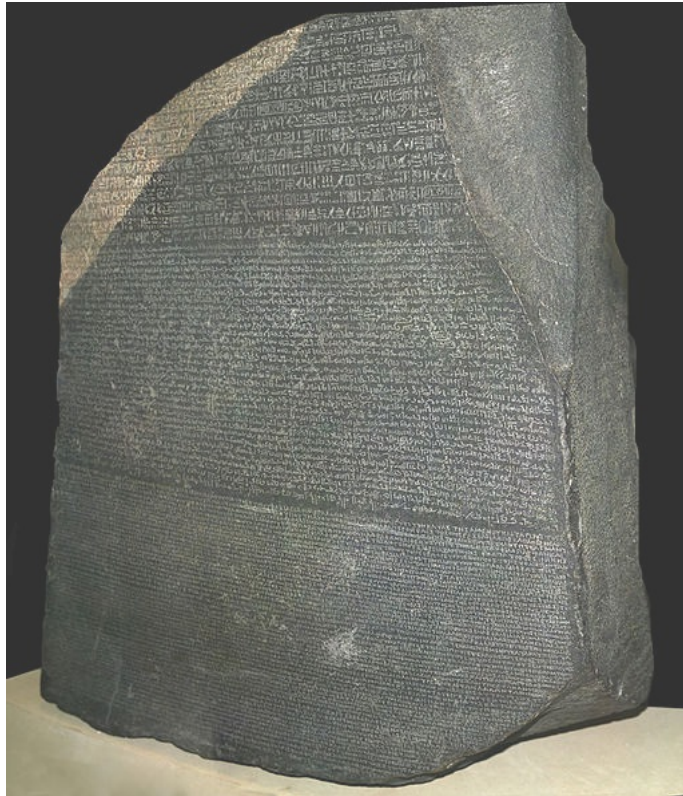
Of course, this may mean that less people read or hear what the contributor is saying. That is something that contributors have to keep in mind and make choices about.

But in principle, we prefer that comrades use their first language, even though, in practice, most of the time they use English. We prefer that comrades use their first language because if they do not, then the spreading of our political dialogue will only reach as far as the boundaries of the English-speaking part of the population.

The Communist University wants to break through that barrier. Our objective is dialogue. The Communist University's first and main necessity, therefore, is to foster reading and writing, and to adopt a method that is most conducive to the

development of reading and writing habits among the participants.

There are other skills of communication, and we will set aside a full course called Agitprop that will cover song, graphic design, layout, clothing, and all kinds of means of expression. But here we are dealing with verbal communication, and from the point of view of language.



[The Rosetta Stone](#)

Dictionaries

This will involve the development of dictionaries in all of the official languages that do not have them, which are all nine of the African official languages (isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, seSotho sa Lebowa, siSwati, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga) of South Africa. Such a project could be assisted by the use of [Wiktionary](#), a collaborative project for the development of language dictionaries (not translation dictionaries. An example

is the “[Wikamusi ya Kiswahili](#)”, which contains 13,780 Kiswahili words, defined in Kiswahili. Every language needs a dictionary in the language itself. Every language needs a literature, composed and published in the language. Every language needs production of new literature in the language.

Language in School

The institution of 11 “official” languages in South Africa, sanctified by the Constitution, is as far as we know based on “human rights” precepts. Consequently, because human rights are passive, what has been done so far has not been very effective in terms of bringing the languages to life.

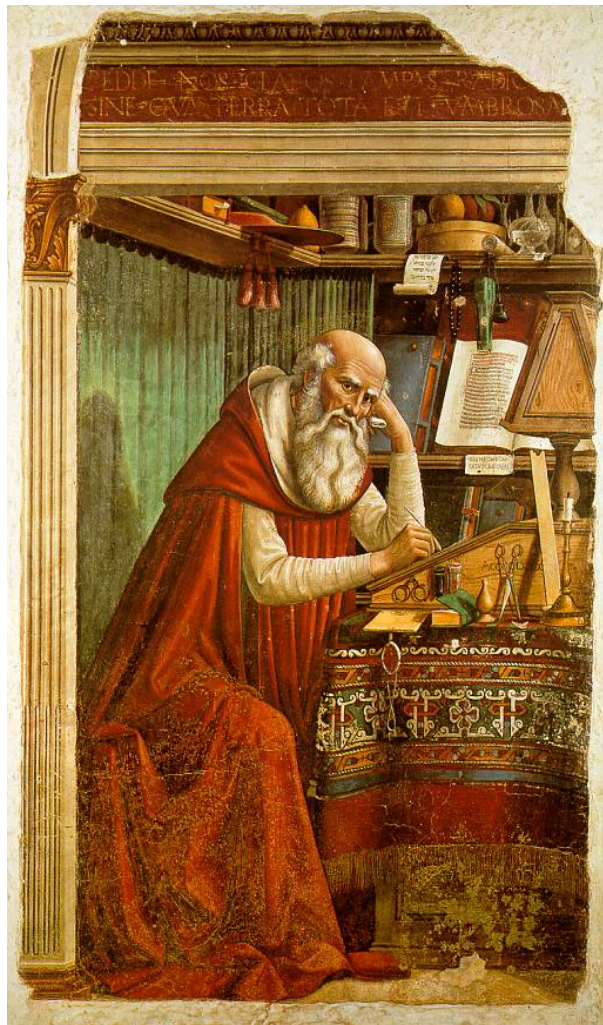
The teaching of children in the mother-tongue that they have from home when they enter school for the first time may be a human right. But if so, then it is not yet being well observed in South Africa. Motivation for change in this regard comes not from “human rights” but from the relatively poor rate of success in attempting to educate people in languages (English or Afrikaans) that they did not learn in the home and therefore do not, in the beginning of their schooling, know.

Imposing on young children the stress of attempting, at a very young age, to learn in language that they do not understand and have not yet been taught, is a cruelty and of course, it is not successful. On average, children who are presented with this hurdle, do not advance as fast as children who are welcomed into the formal education system in their own language.

Broader Political Considerations in relation to language

Politics, from the communist point of view, is the development of people, this being a social process that to happen properly, must involve all. The National Democratic Revolution, to succeed and to complete its historic project, must organise the entire country into a communication, and a constant dialogue.

To do so by imposing, whether by design or by default, one single language, is something we as the SACP do not support, no matter what may have been thought in the past about nations needing to have a single, common language.



[St Jerome, translator of the Bible into Latin](#)

Translation

It follows that the matter of translation must be approached with care. It will not do to have the two former colonial languages, or more likely only one of them (English), being used as the bridge for translation between the speakers of indigenous languages. Such a situation will carry too much of a danger that the English language, which is enormously larger in vocabulary and literature than the South African indigenous languages are, will cease from being a medium of interior national human development, and will instead become a dominant external source.

The problem of translation is one of serving a culture that is expressed in multiple languages. This is a different project from the colonial translation project, which had the aim of dominating the indigenous language-systems, taking ownership of them, and making a bridge by which all of the mother-tongue intellectuals could enter and dwell within the realm of the colonial *lingua franca*.

This distinction has to be asserted politically. Once accepted, it has technological implications which also have to be asserted. If not, then the gains won politically will be smuggled away in the technological execution.

Priority has to be given to the creation of new indigenous-language literature, including a first dictionary, in each language.

Update

Since this item was composed and first published in early 2013, the CU has created [a full course on languages](#).

This introduction has been re-edited, and a text has been found that will serve to codify the questions of language in relation to education. The new text is an article (attached) by Khethiwe Marais, who is a linguist, translator and language expert, currently at UNISA. Her article covers what is interesting to us about language when it comes to education, and the bind that we are in, that causes us to make a disadvantage out of a potential multilingual advantage. Marais points out that the dominance of English, with the advantages that it promises (but does not necessarily fulfil), makes parents into a conservative lobby within the education system.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Multilingualism and Democracy, Khethiwe Marais, 2014](#)
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).